

The Allegory Of The Ark

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract

The evolution of a personal philosophy throughout maturation can be a difficult process to undergo. The works of great minds that came before naturally influence this progression. I hold *the Allegory of the Cave*, a story from Book VII of Plato's *The Republic* and Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* to be the two works that I use as the cornerstones of my own philosophy. These works, however, do contain some contradictory ideas, and the clash between some of those concepts served to spur me towards a creative outlet. To examine some of the contrasting philosophies I inserted them into my novel *Allegory of the Ark*. The journey undertaken in the story examines not only the nature of morality and truth, but also the human struggle to interact with these intangible concepts.

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Artist Statement

Introduction

The evolution and realization of this project was a process of agony and triumph, stemming from the desperate attempt to formalize my own personal philosophy. Early in my education *the Allegory of the Cave*, a story from Book VII of Plato's *The Republic*, fascinated me. The notion of truth existing on a level that is technically attainable, but only through a conscious journey of struggle captured me. For years I held this as the core of my personal philosophy, all the while grappling with the ultimate takeaway of the responsibility to return to the cave and attempt to lead and educate those who have not been outside. In college, when I was introduced to Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, I experienced a radical shift in philosophy. The book pushed me to experiment with ideas of philosophy beyond the prerequisites of culture. Almost immediately I was immolated by a clash between the two works. I challenged myself to justify belief in both ideologies, and ultimately turned to a creative outlet to sort out the dichotomy of ideas. From this conflict I formed the very core of the story for my novel *Allegory of the Ark*.

I

The Allegory of the Cave is an infuriatingly short, and therefore seemingly simple, story. My understanding of it has certainly aged with me as I have matured. Being from the United States, and more specifically, the Midwest, I quickly came to

identify with the story. I felt I had experienced existence in the dark with only the information fed by the shadows. For a long time in my development it was so stress-free to operate on the easy information, the stuff just lying around, ready to be consumed and smiled at. A combination of my age, the Midwestern sensibilities of my educators, and an all American sense of complacency, largely veiled truths about the world around me and the nature of humans. However, at times I had glanced information that was harsh, blinding, and difficult to ingest. It was not long before I started to feel that we were all prisoners in Plato's cave. The prospect of being set loose to climb out and discover the world of light above lingered constantly in my mind. Like most people I was lazy, and though the search for truth was tempting I waited, as if a formalized journey was in order rather than a personal quest.

When I reached college I realized that there was no tour-guide-led track to the destination described in the story. No one would make me truly look at the world to see its beauty and evil in the most truthful of terms. Nothing was in my path that would dictate I examine the nature of people. With all that in mind I reexamined the story, translating it to the contemporary time I faced. I interpreted the flow of information to the prisoners as the key, and in modern terms attaining knowledge is no less convoluted. A person must carefully learn and cross reference all the facts to arrive at what could most accurately be described as the truth of even the most basic matters, let alone those of major theoretical questions. In that fashion I started to be more conscious in my consumption of information. I knew I

was supposed to be looking as directly at the source as possible and be beholden to no puppet master of shadows.

For a couple years I was content with my progress, and although I would not dare to hope I would ever reach the bedrock of truth, I was proud to be less complacent than many. It was only after this happy period that I realized I had been neglecting the end of the *Allegory of the Cave*. The proposed philosopher king must inevitably, after his education outside, go back into the cave and serve. There must be a descent back into darkness, and an attempt made to enlighten the other minds, or at least encourage a journey towards enlightenment. I had come to be educated, fortunate enough to see more truth than some who still believed the shadowy interpretations. Those people I ignored. I wrote them off and isolated myself from what I considered to be their ignorance. It was easier that way, because all too often to try and share knowledge with another person ends in hard, painful, failure. I wanted to avoid the struggle, viewing it as futile. When confronted with someone who so obviously lacked the privilege of being challenged to think critically about any issue I shied away. I never fancied myself a philosopher king, but my actions were not those of someone seeking self-betterment. I realized per the story that I was morally obliged to have these encounters, to take the pain, and to try and push others to investigate the light outside our proverbial cave. It became painfully obvious that the story had always been informing me that truth can only be attained for oneself, but it also is the moral duty of those who have taken that journey to encourage others to do the same.

II

The arrival of Nietzsche into my life was a turning point. All be it I turned into an existential wreck, with pessimism of my own species so thick it could obscure my vision, the emergence of his works into my life marked a transition in my personal philosophy. To this day I am unsure if it was the sometimes-insulting style of his writing or the ideas that were locked therein that drew me to him. However, when I was encouraged to read *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* all question of my loyalty to his ideas was shed away.

Again I suspect it was my upbringing in a society that touts separation of church and state, yet without fail it factors in the religious beliefs of lawmakers in active legislation, that drove me so easily into love with *Beyond Good and Evil*. The ideology that everything behind us, all the great philosophy, is mired in dogmatism and the future is some place beyond the predetermined parameters of societally imposed morality, suited my beliefs. Many times I had experienced religion negatively, not because I had no God, but because it seemed the warped and perverted teachings of religion were used as weapons rather than tools. I had experienced prejudice and hatred as a bisexual, the philosophies of 'God' standing between me and a conversation of reason with other people. These experiences therefor pushed me to examine the detriment that blind ritualistic indoctrination could have on the cognitive capabilities of men. I had seen with my own eyes what it was like when an individual could not negotiate around a piece of information that

had been fed to them, to examine the issue without the burden of that inorganic idea planted within themselves.

At times during this phase of my education, I felt as though I needed to peel off my own skin and simply have a nap until death arrived, because the questions raised were without answer. I broached Nietzsche's idea of a 'free spirit' and found it disappointingly absurd. Try though I may I cannot envision a human capable of isolating itself and being so independent of outside influence. Every man, woman, and child walking the earth is predisposed to a certain thought process because it is what they know, so I reasoned much as Nietzsche did that the inherent leanings cannot be avoided, only transcended. He, after all, did note that even the most liberated free spirits would eventually arrive at a set of truths that then would be stamped as the core of a person's being and he or she would be forced to admit "this is I."

I accepted, for the sake of moving forward, that despite admission that a true free spirit cannot exist, it is perhaps possible to shed predispositions and shut out the will of others, to boil down an individual to his or her own raw set of drives. However, that in itself became an idea so unimaginable that it turned out to be hard to grasp. I questioned what "nothing" looked like and suspected that absence itself is a presence. To tear away religion and politics, cultural and biological leanings, in order to expose a virgin mind capable of reason beyond imposed morality, is an abstract avenue to the death of 'good' and 'evil.' This was a line of thought more literal than what Nietzsche may have intended, but mine is a world of practicality, and so I examined the free spirit from a standpoint of implementation, even if the

result would ultimately be a goal entirely unattainable for a human. For once he may have been the more hopeful of the two of us, writing as though someday we might be able to shed our assumptions and live as miserable, yet enlightened, mask-wearing philosopher kings, isolated from the world by our ascension. Without radical change in the parameters of modern society, I cannot accept Nietzsche's vision as a possible future for my species. As a society, it seems that we unfortunately grow closer every day to ape than to übermensch

Bearing in mind the examination of dogmatist thinking, and the notion of the free spirit, I then had to confront Nietzsche's primary argument. Truth itself may very well be a lie. What has been divined as truth is built upon a substructure of prejudice, and due to the nature of men, and the seeming impossibility of the free spirit, any attempt made at a 'mass' truth is doomed to failure. I agree that without 'mass' truth there can be no 'mass' morality; there is only that of the individual. As Nietzsche continued, I realized that he saw truth as a static entity derived from a predisposed thought pattern imprinted by forces outside the mind. Formally I had associated truth with knowledge, but the distinction he continued to make between the two challenged me to distinguish the fluidity of the mind that knowledge demanded. Knowledge stresses doubt and a willingness to attack from every angle in order to better pinpoint a conclusion. The book time and again addresses the nature of the dichotomy and the futility of the human infatuation with it. The existence of pre-moral society, and moral society, weighed heavily in my personal dissection of these ideas. I could not escape the notion that an action should be judged, not by the consequences, but by the motive, and I realized that I was

incapable of shedding my moral disposition to act in a pre-moral way. There was some small hope for me as I continued to examine Nietzsche's argument, that an extra-moral world holds both the consequences and motives of an action as surface level and advocate for closer examination of the raw unintentional drives that inspire it. Though I could not claim to fully grasp the raw drives, I did appreciate the logic behind disavowing morality and truth in trade for knowledge.

On and on the battle went with *Beyond Good and Evil*, and it continues to present day. I do not suspect I will ever reach peace or understanding with all of the ideas contained in it, but I cannot deny that it has impacted my personal philosophy and my understanding of human nature.

III

My attempt to integrate ideas from both *The Allegory of the Cave* and *Beyond Good and Evil* culminated in a clash of philosophies. Plato regularly sites truth (knowledge) as a divine goal, while Nietzsche passionately discredits the notion of knowing truth. Plato stresses the moral obligations of the enlightened philosopher king, Nietzsche denounces adherence to traditional morality. In so many instances they seemed to be at odds.

Perhaps out of desperation I started adapting Plato to fit Nietzsche, as doing the inverse proved impossible. Injection of the cave into Nietzsche's world was a simplistic exercise at first. I negotiated that perhaps Plato had not actually meant 'truth' as defined in Nietzsche's terms. He continued to express that the prisoner

cast out of the cave would have to gradually adjust to seeing the objects and the sun for what they are rather than what they had been described to him by the shadows. This transition, from second-hand information to knowledge attained by ones own eyes, indicated to me an objective journey where by the prisoner had to shed his predisposing in order to see the world for what it was. This seemed a tidy and logical conclusion, so I quickly managed to rectify in my own mind the discrepancy in word usage between the two works. Nearly as quickly as I had justified the word usage, I then remembered the passage of the simile addressing the 'form of the good.' Damning Plato as I went I realized that he was in full support of intelligible good, and by extension evil. I had to be honest and admit that the writing was a product of the time. Plato and Socrates are among those Nietzsche was talking about as he condemned the dogmatism of prior philosophers.

I satisfied myself with a bastardized amalgamation of the two stories in order to hold together my fracturing philosophy. I reasoned that people indeed are trapped in the cave, ignorant of knowledge, and unaware that the pursuit of truth is nearly as pointless as remaining in the shadows of the cave. A journey outside into the light would require a detachment from everything previously known and the discipline to accumulate information in varying ways. Plato cited that the prisoner would first have to look at the shadows, then reflections in water, and eventually the objects themselves; only a 'free spirit' would have the strength to carry out this task. This point I could not belabor. Though technically the ideas are incongruous, I felt as though my first attempt at reconciliation still held a small degree of validity. I

generally began to substitute 'truth' for 'knowledge' as I thought about the journey of the prisoner. Frankly this began to help me evolve the core aspects of both works.

I moved on to the second incongruity. Plato, or rather Socrates in the story, says "the object of our legislation is not the special welfare of any particular class in our society, but of the society as a whole." This was the response to the objection of Glaucon that a philosopher who has journeyed beyond the cave and attained truth (knowledge) will live a 'poorer' life if forced to return to the cave in an effort to serve. No amount of my imagination could escape the reality that *the Allegory of the Cave* does advocate for a morally imposed duty. I knew Nietzsche could never abide such an idea. However, I began to believe that it was not the consequence of the action that Nietzsche's philosophy would disagree with, but rather the root of it. Plato seems to suggest that the philosopher is inclined to return and suffer because it is simply the 'good' or 'right' thing to do. Nietzsche I surmised was generally speaking as to the traits of a philosopher who would more than likely return to the cave, however they would do it not out of a sense of morality, but instead a drive within themselves. The philosopher described in *Beyond Good and Evil* is knowingly entering into a life of suffering because he or she is doomed to be misunderstood by every other living soul. However, that suffering is not undertaken for the good of the group, but rather the good of the self. This contrast between the two works highlighted for me that, perhaps, given the right circumstances, the seemingly conflicting ideologies might yield the same results. This conclusion was the spark that ignited my creative fire.

IV

It is not in my nature to relinquish belief in something if I have passion for it. Time spent meditating on the unsolvable conflict of philosophy between *The Allegory of the Cave* and *Beyond Good and Evil* started the creative wheels turning. I had long had an idea for a story, though it was still in the infancy of its development, about a world where people had cloistered in underground cities to escape calamity on the surface. Though subterranean fiction is a genre of its own, I largely was inspired by the *Fallout* franchise, a video game that is near and dear to my heart. In the series nuclear attack forces the people underground into secure 'vaults.' Though the games do explore some of the aspects of human nature that would arise in situations such as those brought on by seclusion, war, and disaster, I always was left wanting for the philosophic implications of such an event. As I was playing the game my character emerged from the darkness of a vault onto the surface and was blinded by the light and strange landscape. I felt foolish that I had never made the connection before, but what can I say for the atrophy my brain was undergoing after hours in front of the television. Thus my novel, *Allegory of the Ark*, was titled and formalized in my mind.

I knew that I could assign the two opposing works of Plato and Nietzsche to the opposing forces in my story. One force was the ark dweller and protagonist of the story, Lexi Connel, who would play an adaptation of the prisoner emerging from the cave. Her opposition, and representing Nietzsche, would be Colton Sharp, a surface dweller that essentially embodies what I interpreted to be an 'attainable'

free spirit. Through the plot of the story I manipulated Colton and Lexi into direct contact, and exposed both of them to the environment on the surface, and in the ark. By doing so I was able to sort out the contrasting ideas and allow them to guide a discussion of the interaction between their two starkly opposing philosophies.

While it was a generally easy and enjoyable process to pilot Lexi and Colton through their journey, my real challenge came in finding an appropriate ending for the story. It occurred to me that just as I had not been able to assimilate both the teachings of the allegory and Nietzsche into my philosophy, so too did I have to choose ultimately toward what path Lexi would gravitate. Her journey was from the dark shadow-world of her ark, with prejudice dictating her beliefs, to an enlightened state of knowledge. However, her mission was to go and return to the ark. Her 'moral' obligation was to enter back into the world of repression, misinformation, and shadow, to not only save her people, but serve them with her knowledge. If she was to be a representative of what Plato believed to be a philosopher king, she would have to leave behind the world above in trade for suffering. However, during her journey, as she encountered knowledge and shed her prejudice, she would have to transcend being beholden to the morality instilled in her by the institution of the ark.

Lexi more closely resembles the philosophy of Colton, and therefore Nietzsche, by the end of the book. This would indicate that she would feel no need to return to the cave and, instead, elect to remain above. Though this line of logic and character progression made clear to me what the ending should be, I found myself hesitating to pull the trigger on it. Something felt wrong about an

abandonment of duty, even if there was an abandonment of traditional morality. I then realized that Nietzsche had indicated that an extra-moral world would view actions via the base drives that inspired them. Examining what Lexi's core beliefs would look like after being stripped of her inclinations, was challenging. I knew that just because she had shed the imposed morality the ark had instilled in her, did not mean she would be devoid of her own code, and it is possible that her version of morality might dictate her return. This brought me back to an earlier realization that two different philosophical codes might yield different journeys that end at the same destination. By the end of the book Lexi, although devoid of morals based on truth, carries a new set of personal codes based on fluid knowledge she had gained. This would leave her in a position to suffer, if exposed, to those who were stuck in a static moral system. She would feel no obligation to suffer for them, as she now has begun the process of suffering for herself and her own betterment. This position would not preclude her from interacting with those in the ark, but it certainly would not drive her to fustily try to pass knowledge she knows cannot be transmitted. Ultimately I arrived at the realization that Lexi, as the prisoner, would negotiate a smarter way to serve her fellow people in the ark, while mitigating her own suffering and futile efforts. This was how I came to generate the idea of Lexi and Colton opening the ark and restoring it so that it may continue to function, but also forcing the door to the outside world to remain open so as to more or less force the other prisoners in the dark to at least glimpse the light of knowledge.

V

Reflecting on this project, I feel successful. I have come to realize that I will never stop assimilating new material and ideas into my personal philosophy, but the process of doing so should not preclude me from using my own beliefs in my writing. Previously I had always felt hesitant to work too much of myself into my fictional work. However, after the past semester I underwent life-changing events that pushed me to realize that without my own personality and my own values in my work, it has little worth.

I nearly died while working on this project. I was run over by a large pick-up truck and came close to bleeding to death. Now I am a shadow of who I was before, and the damage will last for the rest of my life. The experience, though damaging, did give me a new appreciation for the process that I was working through while completing my thesis. Whereas before I was simply completing undertakings, meeting deadlines, and chugging away towards arbitrary goals I had generated for my future, the accident made me realize that every task is an opportunity for a statement. While undergoing my lengthy stay in the hospital it occurred to me that humans are simply a collection of the statements we make. Some instances are shocking, others comforting and sweet. I realized that I myself had been squandering my chances to make my statements, and had shied away from sharing under the pretense that I had no worth in the world marketplace because of my inexperience and smallness. As I struggled to complete the most basic biological tasks such as breathing, it dawned on me that we are all small. We are all basic.

This is what gives each soul the grounds to make their statements and to be secure in the worth and power of what he or she believe.

If I am honest with myself, I admit that my novel is very much a 'first novel.' Though I will complete it and love it, I know it is not to be my masterpiece. With that said, I look back on my work and I can say proudly that I am happy and I am confident in my work. This is a step in my career and evidence that I am continuing to grow. Most importantly this is evidence to me that I achieved the ability to work at the honors level.

Outline

ACT I

Far into the future humans terraform and colonize another planet outside the solar system. It is considered a huge success with millions of people inhabiting the new and massive world. However, after a generation lives on the planet the terraforming starts to deteriorate and the planet experiences environmental events. As a result the people are forced to shelter in Arks, massive underground cities, which they construct in response to the planetary changes and decrease in temperature. For five hundred years humans remain safe under the ground, adopting a culture of harmony and achieving a utopian state.

Lexi Connel lives in ARK 137, experiencing routine living for an ark dweller. However, the air filtration core is dying in Ark 137 and the only way to keep the situation livable is to obtain the materials needed to generate a new core. The council leadership of the ark, engages in a selection process to find a runner to carry out retrieval of the needed materials from another ark. They factor in the physical prowess and mental aptitude of all suitable candidates. Lexi is the unlucky soul chosen for the mission via the combination of her test scores.

Lexi is whisked away from the life she knows and is hurriedly trained in a crash course that prepares her for the surface world above. She is educated on the dangers of the surface and the existence of humans living on top. Once thought to be myths and stories, toppers are those who left the darkness of the arks and began living in the harsh world above. Though she has no desire to undertake the mission,

Lexi is aware that she also has no other choice. The council controls all aspects of ark life, and they can force her to leave if necessary.

Leaving the cave renders Lexi blind in the dazzling light of the surface world. The landscape above is a cold forest leading to a seemingly endless tundra for Lexi to traverse. For a day she is enamored with the glowing world that is strange to her, and after dark she is better able to see the truth of her environment. On the second day of her journey, however, Lexi learns of the danger outside of the ark, and is attacked by a team of hunters. The men are fierce and it is apparent that killing her is not the worst thing they may do. Lexi attempts to escape, and once cornered attempts to reason with the men, but is struck and rendered blind in the light as her protective goggles are tossed away. Fortune smiles on her though, and Colton Sharp, another topper, saves her. He is merciless in his slaughter of her attackers and for a moment Lexi fears that Colton too is an enemy. However, after returning her goggles, he is more interested in looting his kills than in dealing with the ark dweller.

Frightened and hopeless, Lexi realizes that her navigation tool has been damaged in the attack. Desperate, she appeals to Colton for help and they strike a bargain. He agrees to take her to his village where she can get another navigation tool in trade for a portion of her goods.

Their journey is mostly silence, strangers to one another until at last they reach Colton's home, the village Rocken. Lexi is startled and appalled by the nature of the Toppers. They are crude and hedonistic; to her eyes they live like evil men acting without appeal to morality. Colton attempts to help Lexi adjust to the

situation, introducing her to his brother, and displaying some of their culture in a vibrant market place. However, it is too much for her to process so quickly and ultimately she commits a faux pas that starts trouble. Though his bargain with her is up, Colton steps in and settles the situation through another act of animalistic violence. Though he is injured in the fight and his display frightens Lexi, she cares for him as he recovers.

Lexi leaves Colton's side only when he receives visitation from Jake, his 'employer.' During the conversation between Colton and Jake it is revealed that the former is indebted to the latter. Jake is the leader of a successful gang. Colton, in an effort to save his brother from a debt, agreed to use his technical skill to try and crack the arks. Colton is long overdue on his promise and Jake threatens to kill him on the spot. It is then revealed that Colton holds Lexi as his trump card. Jake is satisfied with the promise and retreats only after saying that he will bring the blasting materials either way.

When Colton is strong enough, Lexi prepares to make the rest of her journey. Without being prompted, he offers to act as a guide and bodyguard for the rest of the trip. When Lexi wants to negotiate a price with him, Colton says the only payment he wants is the chance to go inside the ark with her to see what life is like. They strike the deal and move out.

ACT II

Colton and Lexi face the harshness of the forest as they head for the tundra. He teaches her how to use a primal navigation tool, one much sturdier than her high tech one from the ark. Hungry and cold, Lexi asks why Colton did not pack more provisions for them. He shows her how to hunt, and Lexi experiences death intimately for the first time. As she touches the dying animal she is brought to tears and they discuss the nature of permanence. As he prepares their meal, Lexi is shocked at how insightful Colton is. Though he lacks the formal education that she is accustomed to he is philosophical in nature.

The journey continues and Lexi is schooled in the unforgiving nature of the surface as suddenly they become prey for predators more vicious than humans. Giant snow cats prowl the surface, stalking them. In the darkness Colton tries to fend off the attack. The cat immobilizes Colton and circles, coming in for the kill. He looks to Lexi for back up, but she is incapable of taking action to end the violence, but she does manage to scare off the cat long enough for Colton to escape and kill it. He scolds her for being unable to act in self-preservation and they debate the ethics of acting in fear. She argues that they should not let the looming fate of death scare them into action. Colton then notes her hypocrisy because life in the ark is based on the principle of escaping death for as long as possible. The conversation ends in a stalemate and they sleep.

As they enter the tundra Lexi is startled by the vast vacancy of the expanse. She hesitates to leave the cover of the forest, and Colton urges her forward. She

senses some urgency in his voice as he constantly compels her forward and watches behind them.

They trek forward into the whiteness and to stave off boredom Lexi challenges Colton to a series of hypothetical questions and examinations of his culture. She attempts to wrap her head around his nature and the nature of his people. When it eventually irks him, she offers him the same opportunity to question her. He replies that he does not need to, and Lexi is offended. She argues that her culture is as diverse and complicated as his, if not more so. He replies that her people act on century old presumptions that are a static anomaly against nature.

Before she can fight back against the insinuation, the earth cracks beneath their feet. Colton explains that the planet is full of caves and chambers under the ice. He tries to navigate them around the danger, but instead the ice shatters and starts to slide down in great sheets. Colton sinks a pick into the ice and attempts to keep them from falling into the abyss below, but cannot hold both of them. He is unwilling to let her go, but she slips away and falls. Lexi expects to die, but instead crashes into the pool of an underground hot spring far below. Her immediate elation about not dying is erased as she starts to drown, having never swam before.

Colton drops into the spring and saves Lexi, helping her to the bank of the spring. As she catches her breath she examines the beauty of the underground ecosystem that has flourished thanks to the heat. He suggests they wait out the night in the warmth of the spring and continue the journey the next morning. As they camp by the spring Colton finally reveals the struggle of the Topper way of life.

He reveals the pain and the hardship that natural living brings, and they debate whether life in the ark is a departure from nature. This brings them to a discussion on the inherent traits of people behind all the socially imposed conventions. Lexi argues that the Toppers have their own conventions, but Colton replies that the conventions of his society can be overturned by a single individual with out much trouble, where as the traditions of the ark are seemingly inescapable.

They ascend the crevasse and leave behind the hot spring. They travel across the tundra and come to the opening of Ark 140. Lexi enters the code that allows them inside and Colton eagerly watches. They descend the tunnel and are greeted by the council of the ark. Lexi is happy to be in a familiar environment, but Colton finds their decorum formal and ridiculous.

They take a day to rest, and decide to leave the following day. Lexi attempts to show Colton the parts of ark life that she believes exemplifies their nature. He is repulsed and saddened by the repression and blindness of the people. As they visit a school, the teacher invites Colton to speak before the class. Though he is uncomfortable he fields some questions from the children. The experience derails when he attempts to explain that religion on the surface is a much more individual experience. This causes great upset, and within hours of it there are angry people hounding Lexi and Colton. She attempts to diffuse the situation by citing their pledge to pacifism as the situation becomes more heated. They claim that Colton is an affront to God and to the good of the ark.

Ultimately Colton is the one who quells the crowd, displaying his natural talent for violence over the others by striking down an aggressor. The crowd parts as council workers arrive and they are escorted to their quarters.

Before bed Lexi struggles to comprehend why her logic could not stand against the anger of the crowd. Colton reasons that he was speaking to the true human form beneath all the indoctrination of the ark. He explains that people work based on core drives, and if the drives are addressed there will be lasting results. Lexi wonders if she will be rejected and resented when she returns to her own ark, and Colton can offer minimal comfort against the idea. He knows that she most likely will never be able to assimilate back into the culture she came from. He cites that what is known can never be unknown.

In an act of compassion he suggests that perhaps she not return to her own ark. Lexi grows distressed, feeling a moral obligation to carry out her mission for her people. She says she must take back her information so that her culture is not ignorant. Colton, knowing better, allows her to sleep rather than argue the point.

As Lexi sleeps, Colton slips away. He sneaks through the tower and up the tunnel. With razor precision he hacks the terminal that controls the door and learns the basics of the program that controls it, allowing him to create a remote that will open any ark. He returns to bed and in the morning, with the materials for the air filter packed safely in Lexi's bag, they make ready to go.

The pair climbs the tunnel and emerges into the light of the surface world. Lexi is unaware of Colton as he leaves behind the remote to open the door. The sky

before them is angry and Colton worries over the storm that appears to be forming. Lexi suggests that they return to the ark to wait out the weather, but Colton resists. He tries to dig in and shelter them as the storm whips up, but it is too fierce. In the middle of the blizzard Lexi forces them back towards the ark.

As they near the ark Lexi trips over something in the snow, and digs up the frozen body of an Ark dweller. She immediately realizes something is wrong and they race to the door to the ark. It stands wide open, bodies of frozen refugees litter the surrounding ground and inside Lexi can hear the screams of an invaded culture. She turns, seeking help from Colton, urging him that they are responsible to do something. He refuses to enter the ark as they linger at the opening of the tunnel. Lexi becomes angry with him, pressuring him, but Colton will not relent.

Lexi begins to go alone, but is met by a gang in the mouth of the cave. She is frightened by the toppers, but attempts to stand up to them as they overpower her. Colton arrives and she expects him to fight, but instead he speaks with the gang as friends, revealing his connection to Jake. Colton is praised for his work, and Lexi is beside herself with grief at the betrayal.

Jake allows Colton to retain possession of Lexi as a reward. His gang proceeds to leave the mouth of the tunnel, entering the storm to travel by snowmobile to the next ark.

ACT III

Lexi is certain that Jake has set his sights on ark 137. She violently reacts toward Colton, and although he is hurt and is sorry to have injured her, he is smug that she has abandoned her 'pacifist' style. He notes that she is now being enlightened in the 'truth' of life on the surface. It is a futile endeavor to make her see the irony of her descent through ascent. He attempts to explain his position, but she doesn't listen to him. Colton is left helpless to do anything but watch as she attempts to brave the storm and chase Jake.

Unable to navigate, Lexi nearly freezes to death in the snow. Just as she stops moving and gives into the realization that she has doomed herself to death, a man on a snowmobile appears. Through cunning Lexi manages to lure the gang member, who has become lost, close to herself. In a desperate act Lexi kills the man and steals the snowmobile, using the navigation tool that Colton gave her she moves on.

The storm clears and in the light of day Lexi catches up to Jake's gang. She attempts to attack them, but is quickly overpowered. As Jake tosses her to the ground, she notices the porous ice beneath them, deducing that they are above a cave. Lexi frantically attempts to figure out how to break the ice before Jake kills her, but comes up empty handed.

Colton arrives just in time to beg Jake for Lexi's life. The negotiation goes poorly and Jake resolves to kill both of them, as they are too empathetic for the ark dwellers. During the conversation Lexi manages to grab a pack of explosives from one of the snowmobile as Colton scraps with Jake over the remote. Lexi throws the

explosive and the blast shatters the ice. It rains into the bottomless chasm below, swallowing the gang and their equipment.

Lexi and Colton scramble to get beyond the falling ice. This time it is Lexi who manages to drive a pick into the solid ice and keep Colton and herself from falling. Unable to lift them both up, they dangle helplessly. Colton suggests she drop him, but she refuses. He scolds her for infecting him with her foolish ark sensibilities, then lets go. Lexi is devastated as she crawls to safety.

She trudges home, a changed woman, and at the door to her ark, she cannot decide if she should carry on. Lexi meditates on her course of action, torn between completing her mission and bettering the ark, or living for herself. She wonders if allowing them to remain underneath in denial of their nature is even the best for the group.

As Lexi sits in the snow, contemplating, Colton arrives. He is hurt, but alive having managed to get footing on a ledge before the last drop off. They debate Lexi's predicament after a heartfelt reunion. Ultimately they decide to save the ark, but force the door to always remain open. Colton suggests that if the outside world and all of its ugly truth can get in, the people will be forced to face it, removing a barrier of truth from the equation.

Lexi and Colton carry out their plan, indicating that despite their differences they should remain in each other's company. Their growing loyalty towards one another is the final indication that they, though not harmonious, are compatible.

Allegory Of The Ark

CHAPTER ONE:

The physical screenings were unprecedented in ark 137. Without warning the council of nine had issued a citywide decree that everyone under the age of forty be tested rigorously to conclude their level of fitness. Thirty thousand of the subterranean city's seventy thousand residents reported to assigned stations and displayed their physical capabilities. After the testing, most forgot it had even happened. A fluke, they concluded, or perhaps something for research. Few knew the true reasoning behind the mass evaluation.

The normalcy and regulation of life in an ark was a sublime regiment. Each resident completed a function, vital to the wellness of the society. Every man woman and child was secure from birth to death under the watchful eye of god and the loving leaders of the ark. For generations the system had provided, and it was unthinkable that anything could change. Anomalies to the routine, unpleasant and unwelcome, such as the fitness test were forgotten as quickly as possible.

It was nearly seven in the evening when a knock came at the apartment door. Lexi was in kitchen, inhaling the aroma of coffee brewing, when the tapping came. She put down her mug that she'd been eagerly fondling in anticipation and moved through the modest studio space. In the back of her mind she felt some trepidation

about looking through the peephole. She'd made no orders for delivery and didn't expect company. In her experience only bad news came after six in the evening.

Quietly she stood on her tip-toes and peeked out the door. Two men filled the hallway, dressed in fine suits. Council workers, she immediately recognized by the distinctive gold and shining lapel pins. "Okay?" she murmured to herself as she tried to straighten her clothes and smooth her tousled auburn hair.

Putting on a brave face Lexi opened the door wide. "Good evening," she said. They eyed her, clearly surveying what they could see of the apartment behind her as well.

"Lexington Connel?" the taller of the two asked.

"Yes?" she replied, resisting the urge to cross her arms. Lexi knew she'd done nothing wrong, but it did nothing to slow her pulse as she stared down the men. In the ark the appearance of council workers never boded well. Ark crime rate was nearly nonexistent, but what crime there was the council workers were tasked with handling. They were not gentle men.

"The council has requested your presence at the central building," the worker said. His partner was silent as a statue, moving only to blink.

"Have I done something wrong?" Lexi asked, the sound of blood rushing in her ears.

"No, but they do request your presence," the tall one said, his voice cold as ice. Lexi glanced between the two men and with a knot in her throat spoke as if she were speaking to a friend.

"I'll get my shoes."

CHAPTER TWO

Lexi had never meditated on the transportation system within the ark the way she did during the time it took to reach the central building. The city was miles underground, well protected from the harsh climate of the surface. The porous nature of the planet had lent itself well to the construction of vast open spaces supported by gargantuan pillars. Each of the expanses was connected via railway tunnels to the next. It took two trains to get from Lexi's apartment in the southern borough of the city, to the central cavity. For every second of the ride she felt as though years were passing.

As they sat on the train, Lexi felt isolated in the crowd of people around her. She was alone, the men on either side of her sending a clear message to anyone who cared to look. For a brief moment she made eye contact with an old woman who hardly peeked out from the scarf she had wrapped about her head. Lexi tried to force a smile, but the woman glanced away, acutely aware of the council workers. It

had never occurred to Lexi that truly she was alone. The tight comforting support of her community was absent in the presence of these men in suits, and it made her ill.

"Are you alright?" the taller man asked, noticing color drain from Lexi's face as the train rumbled to a halt at the administration district stop in the central cavity.

"Yeah," she muttered trying to unattached the bottom toggle of her coat from where it had slid between the seats of the train car, trapping her. The simplest trifles suddenly became so frustrating and mortifying that Lexi could feel her cheeks getting red. Her head spun as she freed herself and they exited the car onto the platform. Stairs led upwards to the street level and people brushed past as if Lexi and the council workers were ghosts.

The world around them was a fog. She'd walked the streets of the administration district a thousand times in her life. For twenty-five years Lexi had come and gone through the center of the ark, first at the heels of her parents and later on her way to her very own job in the writers room of a news station. Never before in that time had she taken in the gloomy surroundings of the central expanse. Hundreds of feet above the massive lights attached to the ceiling of the cavity mimicked sun and moonlight, but now Lexi could only see the areas of shadow that they cast on the ground. The darkness crept from every corner and overhang, threatening to consume her.

They hung a left at the first intersection and walked towards the mighty stone pillar that was the central building. Ancestors of ancestors had carved the city into the earth to escape the cataclysm that consumed the world above, leaving the

massive underground skyscrapers to their decedents. Until the day that she was escorted inside the building had always made Lexi feel safe. She felt as though it had been a beacon, signaling that firm leadership was in play, that the ark and humanity would survive. As they passed through the marbled glass doors the sense of security was gone and it seemed a foreboding behemoth before her.

The lobby was beautifully ornate, stonework fit for the churches lined the walls, but Lexi saw none of it. She stared straight ahead as the men marched her past the sleepy looking receptionist and to the elevator. Inside the small space the shorter of the council workers punched a code into the elevator key pad and Lexi's stomach twisted as there was a smooth acceleration upward.

There was no expectation of what awaited her at the top. No one knew who the council members were, and the prospect of seeing them unnerved Lexi. The nine positions of leadership were sacred and secret. Replacement of a leader was a convoluted process filled with illusions to ultimately conceal the final candidate from public view. Over the years the ark had come to find that leadership was easier to follow if it was anonymous. Each citizen saw their leaders as their minds eye wished to see, and it bred unity. The council was all powerful, second only to god.

The doors opened and Lexi's eyes fell upon an empty room, save for a single chair. The walls were white, save for the gleaming golden elevator doors and a long black panel the length of the room above the lift. She looked to the man standing on her right and he gestured to the seat. "Wait there," he said. She obeyed, at a loss to

do anything other than comply with the instruction. The elevator doors slid closed and Lexi was left alone.

"Fuck," she breathed nervously. The white walls made the space seem infinite. Citizens of the ark were not prone to claustrophobia, having never known an open space they could not see the end of, but great expanses of nothingness left them uneasy. Lexi wrung her hands and looked back to the elevator, then up to the gleaming black panel. She put together that it was glass just in time for the lights to shut off, leaving her in total darkness. "Hello?" she called in panic.

Light blinded her, illuminating the wall opposite of the glass. She traced the path of the beam back to behind the dark glass and realized it was projecting images. Adrenaline chopped at her comprehension, but she viewed the pictures nonetheless until at last voices came. They spoke from an indeterminate location and it sent a chill up her spine as if they stood right behind Lexi, whispering into her ear. "Ms. Connel, so glad you could come," a woman said. Lexi wanted to craft a reply, but words failed her, and the woman continued. "We do apologize for the unusual hour to call, but sometimes business hours simply won't do."

"It's okay," Lexi said meekly.

"We want you to understand that you are not in any sort of trouble," a male voice, sounding old as time itself, said.

"That's a relief," she said carelessly before catching her tongue. A chuckle came from a new male voice, one smooth and sultry.

"Sorry if we frightened you. To alleviate that fear we will cut right to the chase. You've been selected to undertake a mission of utmost importance on behalf of the ark," he said. Lexi did not feel the alleviation of any fear, but instead a pinching sensation in her gut. She looked at the screen, light streaming in from behind her to hit the white wall and project the image of machinery Lexi did not recognize.

"The ark will die," the old mans voice said.

"Don't be so alarmist," a new woman said shrilly. Lexi struggled to keep the four voices distinguished. "The ark is in jeopardy, but we have the time and power to stop the danger. That is where we need your service," she explained.

"I don't understand," Lexi said as she studied the image.

"The core of the air filtration system is breaking down," the smooth man said. "We need to replace the key components inside, but lack the base materials to generate the proper chemicals," he continued.

"An oversight on the part of our predecessors," the first woman said softly.

"What can I do?" Lexi asked, her brow pinching as she tried to wrap her head around the problem. The ark was the pinnacle of engineering. Every ark across the globe was a completely self contained and self-sustaining. Air, water, power, and production had been assured for thousands of years.

"We have bargained with ark 138 for the materials we require, but we must send someone to retrieve the goods," the smooth voice said.

"The last months have been spent finding a viable candidate for a runner," the shrill woman said. Lexi was not a fool, and although fear and confusion clouded her mind it had become too clear why she was present. "The physical examination was the last dataset we needed to make our decision," she said.

"Absolutely not," Lexi choked out as she stared at the screen.

"Your test scores, aptitude testing, physical fitness, and social standing all make you an optimal candidate," the old man said. Lexi realized she was clenching her fist so hard her nails had pierced the skin of her palms. The image changed from the air filter to a map. Lexi had remembered old maps from grade school, showing the world above, but they had been as irrelevant to education as the ancient history of Earth had been before colonization. For a citizen of the ark it was all useless information.

The map on the screen had a red line plotting a course from ark 137 to ark 138. "We will train and equip you and then you will go," a new voice said. It was harsh, as though the man had only just woken and not yet cleared his throat.

"I can't, no one can. It's not possible to live on the surface," Lexi objected. The image changed to a photograph of a lush evergreen forest, snow making the benches droop. The color was so crisp Lexi felt as though she could touch it. Weather was nonexistent in the ark, but still school children were thought the fundamentals of rain and snow as part of history and science classes.

"Our research via probes report otherwise," the shrill woman said.

"The surface is technically habitable," the soft-spoken woman said. "Though it's a harsh desolate place," she added. Lexi could only imagine that woman as a mother and the other as a schoolmarm. The voices were beginning to take on personality in her mind and she felt less alone in the room.

"But the terraforming failed... the cataclysm?" Lexi half spoke to herself. Everything she knew to be true about the world she lived in was changing as quickly as the images on the screen began to change. Photo after photo revealed a tundra above, filled with hardy vegetation and even wildlife.

"All things come to an end," the smooth voice said. "The ice age is over, and the surface is livable," he said.

"Then why is the ark closed still? The founders said we should leave when the planet is habitable," Lexi said.

"The degradation of our way of life would be incomprehensible if we leave the ark. Here we have a utopia, free of crime and want. For generations now the council has been voting continuously to remain secluded from the rest of the world, as have many other arks," the old voice said.

"But not all?" she asked. The photo on the screen changed and the outline of men on the distant horizon became visible. "Toppers?" Lexi whispered to herself.

"Some arks are no longer closed. Men do live on the surface," the soft woman said.

"Toppers are real?" Lexi repeated, unable to believe that the story so many children in the ark had been told was in fact reality. There had always been stories of arks that opened and men gone savage in the wasteland above, but that was all such tales had ever been thought of, just stories.

"That's why we chose you. We could have picked someone stronger, but we instead have elected to choose speed and durability. You will be able to out pace any threat you may encounter on the surface, and your aptitude tests show good stress response," the gruff man said clinically. Lexi felt like a piece of meat, livestock to be inspected for defect or fault.

"You got it wrong," Lexi said trying to keep her cool.

"Unfortunately we aren't asking," the shrill woman said. The ultimatum was not scary because Lexi knew exactly what it meant, but the sweeping breadth of the vague threat was enough to shake her to the core. "This is an order. An assignment handed down from us and from god," she added.

"I can't..." the words tumbled from Lexi as tears formed in her eyes.

"It's natural to be afraid, and we wouldn't ask unless it was completely necessary. However, without replacement the filter will only last for a few more years," the smooth voice said. She gritted her teeth and looked at the stark image, black and white against the wall. The outline of people in the vast white tundra speckled with brush was frightening by itself, but the knowledge that for the first time in her life she had no options was worse.

"Alright," she breathed.

"You'll be compensated upon return," the soft woman said.

"I doubt that," Lexi said as a surge of bravery coursed through her. "If this is a calling, I'm doing it for everyone here," she mused. "What happens next?"

"We'll show you," the voices said together.

CHAPTER THREE

Months passed like moments, days falling away in seconds. Lexi spent every waking hour training her body and mind, reading reports from probes of the surface and training her survival skills. She did not see the council chamber again. Each trainer that saw her, every tutor, operated on false pretenses fabricated to protect her true goal.

Her life had been dismantled and put on hold. Her job surrendered, her home shuttered, her family kept in the dark. Lexi ignored the cold facts that her entire being was dissolved in a day and focused on each task put before her.

The final day arrived and a small part of Lexi expected to again 'see' the faceless council. Instead the same pair of council workers who had shown up on her doorstep months before appeared at the door of her hotel.

"Good morning gentlemen," Lexi said. The men nodded to her as they ushered her out. Over the course of her training the pair had become familiar faces, though she was never granted names to assign them.

"Did you sleep well?" the taller asked. He was always the talker. Lexi lied through her teeth to save face.

"Like a rock," she nodded as they took the elevator to the lobby of the hotel.

"Your gear and uniform are waiting in a prep station near the lift," he said.

"Good," she said. The talk felt so stiff, so forced and obligatory. Lexi hated whenever she was trapped by conversation with the council workers. She was never sure if they refused to speak because of the public setting or a true lack of interest.

People were moving on the streets, starting their days and getting to work. The children were in school and the shops were open. Lexi surveyed the bustling urban maze and prepared herself to see it for the last time. Death had only ever been an abstract, something far in the distant future. As she and the council workers entered the central building on the way to the elevator that would take her to the surface death felt as though it was in the space with them.

The shorter council worker punched in the code and the pressure of upward acceleration compressed them. Lexi had become used to climbing the tower manually and she was grateful for the ride. It took her hours each morning to climb

the skyscraper and arrive in the blank projection room where all the worldly knowledge of the council was imparted via slideshow in silence.

The doors opened on a level far above the council's chamber. It was a dim, cold tunnel that sloped gently upwards into infinity. She'd been prepped on what to expect and a small portion of Lexi was excited to finally be free of the nagging guidance of the council workers. "Good luck. We'll pray for you," the taller man said.

"Be safe," the shorter one said. The unexpected words knocked Lexi off balance and she was struck that months of silence had been broken.

"Thank you," she said awkwardly. The men lingered, looking at her like a body at a wake. It hadn't taken Lexi long into the training to figure out that no one expected her to be a success. She was the first attempt, the test run. The documentation of her experience would be used to prepare another runner if she were to fail.

On impulse Lexi reached out and hugged the taller worker. He tensed, but didn't push her away. She craved a moment of contact, to fool herself into believing that after this suicide mission she would be remembered by someone. The worker gently patted her, and stepped away.

"God speed," he said as they retreated to the elevator and left Lexi alone next to her pile of gear. The silence of the cold tunnel rang in her ears as the whoosh of the elevator faded.

She didn't want to go. Lexi stood at the edge of a cliff and suddenly had no courage to jump. However, she knew there was no path behind her to lead back to normalcy. Refusal to do her duty would result in unspeakable repercussions. This was the only certainty in her life. The council could not have been more compelling if they drug her themselves to the surface. They might as well have done so. She was unwilling, yet powerless.

Feeling light headed she sat down and crumbled into a ball. Tears stung her eyes as the unfathomable task before her became a reality. She lamented her misfortune as she held back sobs. Of all the people in the ark, Lexi could not come to accept that she had been so unlucky as to be chosen.

Minutes passed and the urge to cry slowly faded. She wiped at her face and stood, pulling on her coat. She fumbled with the zipper, the black and white camouflage pattern making her comically stick out against the dark rock of the tunnel. Systematically she pulled on her insulating pants and boots and hat and gloves, layers upon layers to try and protect against the cold weather above. Lastly Lexi picked up her goggles and attached them to her jacket. They were too dark to wear inside, but without them she would be blinded on the surface. Hefting her pack onto her back Lexi started the mile long trudge uphill to the gate.

The walk felt all too short. Half way to the gate the walls transitioned from rock to metal, a casing to enforce against intrusion. Shortly after leaving the rock of the earth behind the gate came into view. A mammoth construction of the densest metal available connected to hinges and motors capable of sliding the door along a

rail to open. Lexi put her hand on it, feeling the icy temperature even through her glove. Nearby was the control panel to activate opening the ark, a foreign and unthinkable concept for hundreds of years. She hurried to punch in the code before the fear lingering in the back of her mind could stop her.

A siren blared and Lexi stood clear, hurrying to put her goggles on. The dark shades cut out the dim light and she was left in nearly complete darkness. A deep grinding moan of metal on metal defend her as the door started to open. Cold air rushed in creating a vacuum that whisked away all the age-old warmth of the tunnel. Blinding light burst through the opening crack to the outside world and Lexi snapped her eyes shut tight, the thick dark lenses of her goggles unable to save her from the pain of daylight.

The grinding of metal eventually stopped, and she wondered about the world beyond her eyelids. Cautiously Lexi stepped forward, knowing that the code for the door would only keep it open a brief time. Groping in blindness she shuffled forward towards the cold and bright world outside. "Okay... okay," she murmured to herself as the ground changed below her feet from the solid metal of the mouth of the cave to a soft crunchy material that compressed under her weight.

Lexi jumped as the door moaned, grinding, as it swung closed again. She attempted to open her eyes and glance backwards into the cave, but pain shot through her skull as blinding light stung her eyes. Dazzled by the sunlight she knelt in the snow as the door closed and silence took the unseen landscape. Lexi could

hear the wind mixed with the pulsing rush of blood in her own ears. "You're okay, you're okay," she whispered to herself.

The world was made that much scarier by her inability to view it. Again Lexi tried to open her eyes but she could not keep them from snapping shut again. The sound of crushing snow startled her and she fell backward, pushing her pack against the door. "Who's there?" she asked. No answer came and Lexi held her breath, listening, as she time and again desperately tried to open her eyes. The thick lenses of her goggles seemed to do nothing against the onslaught of the sun. Silence continued as she tried again and again to adjust.

Sitting in the shadow of the ark door Lexi took nearly ten minutes before she could keep her eyes open through a hard squint. The light still burned, and she could not look into the sky or out at the land, but she could see herself, and the mounds of fresh snow heaped against the door in the shadow of the ark. Glance by glance she looked towards the farther world and began to see shapes as the world formed around her. Trees and shrubs and rolling hills of snow stretched out as far as she could see.

Her training had promised Lexi a forest, but she honestly couldn't believe the surreal environment she stood in. Drawing in a deep breath, she exhaled slow fogging the air before her face. "One small step for me," she said shuffling her way out of the shadow of the ark door. "and one giant leap for man kind," she added mocking the ancient explorer as he set foot on virgin ground far from his home planet.

The forest was beautiful, glistening in the light. Her goggles dimmed the view and gave everything a shaded patina that made it look magical. Lexi listened intently as a symphony of life became apparent to her. Wind and snow and trees and animals all moved around her creating a sense of chaos. The sheer volume of new information flooding her senses overwhelmed her. Small furry creatures darted up and down the trunk of the trees, hiding in the thick pine needles and chattering at her as she took careful steps.

A crunch behind her made Lexi whirl. "Hello?" she snapped, unnerved at the idea of anything bigger than the scurrying creatures. Just as it had before, silence rang long and loud. Even the wind and the animals quieted as if to let Lexi assure herself that she was alone.

Her nerves were already shot, and her hands shook in her gloves as she pulled out her navigation pad from its resting place in her breast pocket. The screen on the handheld device lit up, and an adjusting arrow pointed her way as the computer insider plotted the course to ark 140. Lexi took no more time to absorb the new world, and moved briskly in the direction directed. She just wanted to get it over with.

CHAPTER FOUR

Night came too soon for Lexi and the shadows of the forest sprang up around her like demons. Quickly she collected as much dry wood as she could find and lit a fire, the heat melting a hole in the snow until solid grey soil was exposed. The dancing flames were of little comfort as the sun sank below the horizon and Lexi

was left in darkness. She knew her wood would not last the night. "Great," she muttered. "Please help me god," she whispered as she glanced around the forest. Eyes glowed, looking back at her, and chilling her to the bone. They seemed small and she dreaded the moment she looked up into the dark bushes to see large eyes glaring back.

Night lasted for what felt like an eternity. Her training had assured Lexi that there were no animals that preyed upon humans, but the constant snapping of twigs and rustling of branches overturned the promised of safety instantly. It crossed Lexi's mind during the long night hours that they had sent her to the surface with notions of pacifism. All ark dwellers were pacifists. To lash out in violence against another or the world at large was a huge taboo that warranted professional rehabilitation. She'd once seen a man attack another over the price of produce in the market. It stuck in her memory how quickly the crowd around the violent individual had worked together to address the situation. They calmed him, and reassured him, trying to negotiate the issue until council workers arrived to handle the man.

As the wind chilled her skin and she watched the fire illuminate a small bubble in the dark world, Lexi felt as though she'd entered an existence of inverse norms to what she'd previously lived in. Sounds echoed through the trees, isolating her, closing in as the fire died and the safety zone decreased. As the fire reduced to smoldering embers she huddled up under a tarp and felt the falling snow grow

heavy on top of her. Sleep took her just in time for morning to come and rudely steal away escape from the cold.

As Lexi sat up and kicked the snow off she was surprised that nothing had materialized to eat her in the night, but the sense of eyes watching her loomed ever present. Packing herself up she ate a ration bar and looked around the tall trees. "Alright, I'm going now," she said out loud just to hear a voice. The sound died so immediately in the snowy world that it was as if she hadn't spoken at all. Lexi put the silence from her mind and looked at her navigation screen, allowing the arrow to comfort her as it pointed towards the destination. Toward civilization.

Six steps. Six steps were all she managed before the silence was broken and the crunching of snow got her attention. Lexi turned, but the men were upon her. She tried to cry out as one tackled her to the ground, but it was too late. The fray that ensued was one sided as she was weak and feeble. Feeling herself be pressed down into the snow she screamed, "no!"

"Hold still darling," the man sneered. He clawed at her, knocking loose her goggles. Pain radiated through her skull and Lexi was forced to close her eyes as she batted furiously at the aggressor on top of her.

"Hey!" a new voice called. Lexi felt the weight of the man on top of her relent and she rolled onto her belly. With gloved hands she groped blindly around herself hoping to, by some miracle, find her goggles and regain vision. As she scrambled the weight of the man left her completely. He mind raced. She was free. Lexi swiped in

long arks around herself as she tried to make use of her window to escape. She knew she had to find the goggles or be doomed.

The sounds of men grunting and swearing filled the air. Her mind fogged in the heat of panic as she searched. A fight was happening, though she did not know who between or why. Then, silence.

Lexi stopped searching and held still. She could hear only one sound, the steady even panting of another human. "You're looking for these?" the voice asked, evenly. She flinched as something struck her hand. Feverishly she bumbled to pick up the object, defining it as her goggles and mashed them to her face. Snow stung her skin as it melted between the lenses and her eyes, but she could see again.

The man before her was dressed in loose fitting furs the color of earth. He was tall and bulky under the garb, his face angular yet handsome. His eyes pierced her and she found herself in awe of his form. "Why are you up here?" he asked. Lexi sat up on her heels, trying to straighten the straps of her pack.

"I'm just passing through. I don't want trouble," she stammered. He motioned past her, and Lexi glanced back.

"You found it anyway," he said as she looked at the bodies of three men. Deep red blood stained the snow and Lexi felt a cold rush of new fear flood her veins. She looked back to the stranger. "Ark angels shouldn't be up here," he added.

"Ark angels?" she muttered stupidly.

"You're from an Ark yeah? That's what you are. Ark angels," he shrugged and moved over to the bodies, more interested in them than Lexi. She watched, still sprawled in the snow as he kicked a body over onto its back and began to root through the lining of the dead mans clothes.

"I suppose Toppers must have a name for us too..." she said more to herself than him as she stood up and brushed the snow from her jacket. The man glanced up from his frisking of the bodies.

"Toppers? Is that what you call us? Ridiculous," he smirked as he pulled out a knife and a fur from the cloak of the dead man. Tossing his finds into a pile he started to strip the bodies. Lexi was repulsed at the scavenger, but said nothing as she watched. Her mind was abuzz with fear and adrenaline making it hard for her to formulate the obvious question. However, it grew until she couldn't help but speak to him as he rooted around the corpses.

"Why did you save me?" she asked in a small voice.

"I dislike an unfair fight," he said coldly. She nodded, though she did not understand his position. Glancing to the sky and then around he grunted, and hoisted his loot from the bodies onto his back. "If you like, I'll take you to my village and you can trade for a new navigation tool... but you'll pay me in whatever you've got in that pack," he said at length.

She furrowed her brow at the offer. "Navigation tool?" she asked, her hand going to her breast pocket to find her device gone. A new weave of frantic panic

surged through her and Lexi scanned the trampled snow, spotting the pieces of the shattered screen. "Oh God," she gasped feeling ill.

The man bundled up his loot from the corpses, furs and tools and provisions in the cloak of one of the dead men. Tying the corners together he slung it over his shoulder like a pack and looked to her. "Well?" he asked, forcing the issue.

Lexi had to stop herself from physically recoiling. The man scared her. He was a murderer, but also her savior. She glanced to her broken screen one last time before realizing his option was nearly the only one she had. It certainly was the only decent choice. "Deal," she said softly. The man smiled and crossed the snow between them, bloody prints marking where he had stood.

"I'm Colton Sharp," he said extending his hand. Lexi took it and shook. Her instincts told her to run, to mistrust this violent strangers, but her fear urged her to keep close to the man who had spared her life.

"Lexi Connel," she replied. He nodded at the name, glancing once more at her entire form. "Why do you keep looking at me like that?" she asked. He laughed.

"Because you look ridiculous in that outfit... come on. Stay close and stay quiet," he said before taking long strides off into the woods. Lexi glanced one last time at the bodies, a chill running the length of her spine. She carefully followed in the bloody foot prints of Colton, and they began their journey together.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Colton had instructed Lexi to remain silent, he had meant it. Their journey lasted for the better part of the day, and he spoke only once to scold her for slowing down. She asked of their destination, but was met with silence, and every inquiry there after was more a question to the universe than to her guide.

Lexi spent the hours watching how Colton moved. He seemed predatory, like a lion that she had seen video of. Colton scanned the world around them and took long confident strides towards his destination. He acted as if no other purpose in the world was as justified and important as his own.

They arrived just before dusk. The trees thinned and Lexi could see where they had been cut and harvested. A village, as promised, emerged from the forest, inhabiting a clearing of its own. "This is my home, Rocken," he said as they drew near. Lexi could smell roasting meat, and hear the voices of people. The idea of civilization made her heart leap as they got close.

Rocken was a hotbed of activity, and deceptively large, stretching for miles in front of them. Lexi would never have called it a village, but instead a city unto itself. Colton led her directly to the market, and turned to her before they entered the tight stalls of the bizarre. "Do not look anywhere but at your feet, and hold onto me," he said strictly. They started to move forward. "This is a dangerous place if you are not marked," he added.

Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the back of Colton's jacket, her fingers sinking into the fur, while he pushed through the crowd. His strides were long and comfortable despite the cramped conditions. It seemed in his nature to push through the throng on the way to his destination like it was his place to rule. "I'll take you to my brother, Alex, and he can get you what you need," Colton said as they shoved through.

In the back of her brain Lexi knew she had been told to stare at her own feet, but her eyes wandered around the space, over every dirty face and ragged piece of clothing on the back of the inhabitants. She had never imagined that life outside the arks fared so well. No one looked starved or ill. They were a hardened people, barbarians. Some wore thick fur while others sported vintage cotton coats. The vendors and shops that lined the street were constructed of such sturdy wood they seemed as if they would last forever. Goods traded hands, people embraced and fought and spoke, living their lives as if this were normal. Lexi completely forgot that this chaos was indeed normal to them.

"My god..." she murmured under her breath as she tried to slow the fast beating of her heart. Every person she saw had the same tattoo, bold black and red ink marking his or her skin. Lexi studied the recurring image of a Phoenix putting together what Colton had meant by being marked. It was beautiful, strong and elegant all at once. As she stared her shoulder made contact with someone.

"Hey, pretty girl," a gruff voice said as a hand closed in Lexi's hair. Immediately she went on the defensive pulling away in an attempt to escape. As she

took in the situation she realized what a mountain of a man she was up against. Colton pushed his way in between Lexi and the giant.

"Fucking back off!" he snapped. Lexi looked around as people stopped their business and stared.

"Your name on her brother?" the man growled. Colton puffed up like an animal making ready for a fight.

"The bitch is mine! Touch her again and lose the hand!" Colton snarled. He reached behind himself and wrapped his hand around Lexi's, squeezing hard. She was already looking for an escape route, but the sea of people around them prevented any hope for a clean exit.

The hulk of a man held out his arms, daring Colton to make the first move. "So show us her mark. Prove she's fucking yours," he said. The people around them surged backwards, a space opening up around Colton, Lexi and the man. She felt her heart beat out of her chest as she continued to look around in desperation.

"I just found her. I haven't marked her yet," Colton said dangerously. The larger man had a foot in height on Colton, and easily weighed a hundred pounds more. Lexi wasn't sure how much of his weight was muscle, but she didn't want to find out.

"Then she's up for grabs," the big man smiled. Lexi became vaguely aware of stillness, a silence had fallen over the crowd around them. People along the edge of

the open space looked on with hunger like wild dogs waiting to feed. A chill ran up her spine as she realized many of them were glaring at her.

Colton had not broken eye contact with the offending man, waiting for the behemoth to make the first move. Indeed his patience paid off and the hulk swung first. A wild haymaker swung right over Colton's head as he ducked and shoved Lexi. She staggered backwards, being caught by the crowd at the edge of the circle.

Colton shed his pack and his coat in a seamless movement and danced backwards out of reach of the massive man. Lexi didn't have time to even think about acting before the men were tangled with each other in vicious combat. Despite the size of his opponent Colton held his own. He was fast and smart, landing two hits for every blow that even grazed him. His speed seemed his saving grace.

"Come on!" the crowd roared as the man tossed Colton backwards. A particularly brutal hit put Colton on the ground, and Lexi lurched forward as if her body felt there was something she could do, despite her mind's insistence that she was powerless. A hand wrapped itself over her shoulder.

"Go in there and they will kill him and rape you," a raspy voice said. She looked over her shoulder at a lanky man with deep sunken eyes. She didn't have to ask who he was though, the flecks of green and brown mingling together around his pupils gave it away. They were just the same as the beautiful colors in Colton's eyes.

"You're his brother?" she asked.

"In the flesh," he said watching the fight intently. Lexi looked back at the carnage as Colton received a gut punch that made her cringe. Blood was trickling from both men as Colton launched himself from the floor, and drove the palm of his hand into the larger man's nose. The crunch was sickening and the giant was crippled, staggering backwards as red gushed from the wound. "Finish him!" Alex called, his voice mingling with the cheers and chants of the crowd.

Colton was hurting, but he was strong. Lexi could see the power in his shoulder and back as he swung, landing another hard punch against the giant's face. A shattered eye socket for sure, she thought to herself. The smaller man looked around, spotting Lexi and their eyes locked. She could practically see the adrenaline pumping through him, and a faint smile graced his lips.

A shot rang out, and Colton knocked forward, gripping at his left shoulder. Lexi searched the crowd, but Alex beat her to finding the shooter. He whipped out his pistol, fired one shot and with deadly accuracy, and a body hit the floor. She looked back to the ring, where Colton had fallen to his hands and knees. The giant was already up, and it was too late to avoid the powerful kick that landed in Colton's ribs.

"He's going to kill him!" Lexi hissed tensing up. She started to move again, but Alex pulled her back.

"If he dies I'll claim you, but you can't help him," he sneered. Lexi couldn't rip her eyes away from the fight. Colton flopped onto his side and the mountain of a man stuck again with brutality Lexi hadn't known humans capable of. The man bent

down, knotting his fingers in Colton's hair, lifting the beaten man's head as he drug him back to the center of the ring and dropped him. He roared like an animal, working the crowd as if it were a sick game.

"Colton! Get up!" she shouted. The fight was drawing to it's close. A machete tossed from the crowd struck ground and the hulking man bent to collect it. Colton wallowed, attempting to force himself back up. Lexi could see him grit his teeth against the pain, pushing himself back to his hands and knees as the monster returned, blade in hand. "Get up!" she screamed again with urgency.

Time seemed to slow as the large man raised the machete, preparing to bring it down squarely in Colton's back. Lexi felt her heart beat, blood rushing in her ears so loudly it made the crowd seem quiet. She could see every drop of blood falling to the floor from Colton's broken body. She saw every muscle that rippled in the attacking man's arms as he started to swing the deadly blade downward.

Lexi closed her eyes. Though he was crude and no better than any other topper, Colton had shown her kindness. To witness his end was a waking nightmare, and one Lexi had no intention of witnessing. Only the roar of the crowd made her open her eyes once more. Lexi focused just soon enough to see Colton kick in the side of the larger man's knee. He'd rolled out of the way of the attack. The hulking man went down, crippled by the blow and as if he was uninjured Colton leapt to his feet. He drove his thumb into the big man's eye, and agonizing screams filled the air. Again Lexi looked away, unable to stand the violence.

The sound was penetrating, she felt like she couldn't think. Tight squeezes on her shoulder made her open her eyes again. "He's won," Alex said with a twinge of pride. Lexi looked at the ring. The larger man was down, wallowing in agony. Colton, again feeling his wounds, bent down slowly to the roar of the crowd and picked up the machete.

This time Lexi did not close her eyes. She couldn't even though she wanted to. She watched as an icy pit formed in her stomach while Colton stepped into position over his broken opponent. He glanced in her direction, spotting his brother alongside Lexi. The boys, bound by blood, exchanged a nod and Alex smiled. Then Colton looked to her, and the seconds ticking by that already felt as though they lasted for eternity, ground to an even slower pace. Lexi looked into Colton's eyes and felt as though she was having a full conversation with him. They'd known each other for only hours, but twice he had saved her life. She begged him not to go through with what he was poised to do. 'You're better than that' she thought.

In his eyes she could see the response. 'I have to' he seemed to say back to her. Lexi gritted her teeth as Colton brought the blade down, severing flesh and bone. He became an animal before her eyes as he ripped his opponents head off, and held it up, blood gushing down from the neck. Colton roared, "Does anyone else dispute my claim?" and the crowd fell into a hushed silence. It was not of fear, but of respect. He was the victor, he was the survivor, and he was to be respected.

Lexi felt numb as she watched Colton toss the head to the ground. He put his right arm around her, drenched in blood, and spoke in a hushed voice to her. "Don't

let me fall down," he said as she felt most of his weight fall on her. Struggling to make it look as though he was still walking under his own power Lexi retreated under the direction of Colton. "Get my shit," he said to Alex as they passed by.

He directed her weakly to a building constructed of dark wood, with a heavy door and a roofed porch. Alex was suddenly in front of them and opened the door, tossing Colton's haul inside as the pair staggered in from the cold.

It was tight, but clean inside, as Lexi surveyed the tiny 'waiting' room. Alex shut the front door and locked it, shuttering the windows in a hurry. "Take him to the back," he said as Lexi felt Colton begin to collapse completely.

A door led to the next room, one much larger with a reclining padded chair in the middle of it. Colorful art covered the walls. "What is this?" she hissed at him as he collapsed when the door closed behind them.

"This is your place?" Lexi asked looking around as she guided Colton to the chair and eased him into it. He stretched out, nearly prone and grunted in pain.

"Tattoo parlor," Alex said as he plopped into rolling stool. A bottle sat on the silver tray beside the chair. With no concern the gaunt looking brother took it, uncapped it and drank the dark liquid from inside. "You got balls brother, that guy was fucking built," Alex said idly before tossing the bottle down to Colton.

"I think I'm dying," Colton coughed with a smile as he uncapped the bottle and chugged as much as he could.

"You aren't but you should be," Lexi hissed as she hurried to look him over. She opened her pack pulling out her medical kit. She turned on the flashlight and shined it into Colton's eyes. "Follow the light," she instructed. His pupils shrunk to the size of pinpoints and followed the light. "You took a hell of a beating..." she murmured, relieved that his brain hadn't sustained damage.

"They fucking shot me," Colton bemoaned putting his hand to the bloody mess of his shoulder. Lexi pulled his fingers away from it.

"Went clean through," she observed. Colton lifted the bottle to his lips again, but she pulled it away. "Not helping," she snapped.

"Well it fucking hurts!" he hissed back at her. She pushed his head back.

"Just try to relax," she sighed.

"You a doctor?" Alex asked as he picked at his nails, watching the operation with little interest.

"No," she muttered pressing a gauze pad to the bloody wound. She pressed Colton's good hand to it. "Keep the pressure on," she instructed. He coughed, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the floor beside himself.

"It's getting hard to breath," he observed.

"You have broken ribs. Probably punctured your lungs. I'll deal with that in a second," she said rummaging through her kit.

"Deal with it? Don't waste your time. Look at him. He's dead," Alex shrugged, picking the bottle back up off the floor.

Lexi was taken aback by the coldness of the man on the stool. "Is that how you people talk about your family?" she asked. Alex shrugged as Colton began to wheeze.

"He's going to fucking drown, look at him," he sighed. Lexi rolled her eyes and turned Colton over onto his side, so that he could more easily cough up the blood filling his mouth.

"You people make me sick," she muttered as she pulled the gleaming silver tube from her kit. Alex looked on with curiosity as Lexi pulled Colton's shirt up, exposing the small of his back. "This is going to hurt, and you're going to feel cold, but I promise you'll be fine," she said to Colton. As she positioned the tube he started to thrash, and she mentally chastised herself for giving him warning, but his feeble attempts couldn't stop the circle of needles from digging into him, injecting the bots.

"Fuck!" Colton howled. Lexi held him, surprised by how much strength he had left.

"It's fine! It's fine!" she hissed into his ear as he squirmed.

"What did you do?" he exclaimed.

"I injected some nano-bots. They will put you back together from the inside," she explained. Colton flew into a coughing fit, coating the floor with blood.

"I'm not cleaning that up," Alex muttered.

"You fucking bitch!" Colton sneered. "Fucking bots?" he snapped.

"Wish I had a sedative," Lexi thought aloud as she pushed him back down as he attempted to get up again. Alex offered his brother a new bottle and Colton chugged in an instant. The glass hit the floor with a clink as consciousness left him and Lexi looked to Alex. "Thanks?" she grumbled.

"No problem. Let me know if you need anymore help," he smirked before exiting the tiny room. Lexi sat back on her heels and leaned against the wall. The blood had already stopped flowing from Colton's gunshot wound, making her feel more at ease.

"This is a nightmare," she murmured.

CHAPTER SIX

Lexi did not sleep the night she arrived in Rocken. Alex adjourned to his bedroom in the back of the tattoo parlor, while Lexi stayed with Colton in the small workroom. She watched his breathing through the night, checking his vitals periodically as the nano-bots inside him did their work. She knew that inside his body the microscopic miracle workers were speeding the bodies natural processes to save his life, but she worried what would happen if they did not succeed.

In the dark of that long night Lexi had hours to contemplate Colton's kindness to her. She had judged the Toppers to be animals, devoid of compassion, and yet twice he had put himself in harms way for her safety. She wondered why he would be so compelled to protect a stranger. It did not seem to her that what little goods she had to offer inside her pack would be enough to entice him to fight so viciously for her, but she also decided that he probably never counted on fighting the mountainous man in the center of the market.

Morning arrived and with it Colton's consciousness. He stirred slowly and Lexi stood beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Easy," she whispered to him.

"What happened?" he groaned.

"You fought, were injured, injected with nano-bots, and then drank yourself unconscious," she said trying to keep things simple for him. Colton gave her a confused look, before slowly surveying their surroundings. His eyes lit up as he remembered the events of the previous day.

"You really are trouble," he groaned trying to sit up. Lexi pushed him back into the padded chair firmly.

"Stays still. Your body is still healing. You need rest," she said.

"I've some business I have to take care of," he said. Lexi frowned.

"Colton, you will die if you move around before the bots finish. Please just stay still," she said. He looked up at her incredulously.

"Hello nurse," he said. Lexi cocked her head.

"I'm not-" she couldn't finish her sentence before he started laughing.

"Okay Angel... so where is Alex?" he asked trying to compose himself.

"He went to bed. I haven't seen him since," she said. Colton nodded.

"Guess we should let him sleep then," he shrugged.

"You should too," she insisted hopefully. Colton drew in a long breath, allowing his eyes to close. Retrieving a glass of water from the silver tray that Alex had left she lifted it to his lips. "We need to hydrate you though," she said. He drank the cup and she drew it away.

"You really are a caretaker," he said thoughtfully.

"I owe you that much," she said softly. Colton shifted on the padded chair, watching as she put away the cup.

"No you don't," he said. She turned, furrowing her brow.

"You're injured because you defended me... twice now," she said. He shrugged.

"We had an agreement," he said.

"Nothing I have was so valuable you should have risked your life," she chastised.

"Well how would I know that?" he smirked. Lexi folded her arms. She was new to the surface, but not an idiot.

"I can't help but feel you have another motive," she said. Colton flinched. He opened his mouth to reply but instead began to cough. Lexi felt a pang of concern as the coughing fit grew until he curled in the middle, gasping in-between painful chokes. She put her hands on him, trying to sooth him as pain radiated through his injured body.

"No ulterior motive," he rasped at last. "Maybe I'm just a good guy," he added with a sly grin.

"Rest," she insisted. He closed his eyes, too tired and hurt to fight. "I'll stay until you are well," she said.

"You're too sweet angel," he smiled feeling himself drift towards sleep again. Lexi didn't have time to respond before he was out, his body simply insistent on rest. She smiled, brushing his shaggy brown locks from his face. His external wounds were nearly healed to completion, and he was handsome in the dim light.

When she realized how stupidly she was gazing upon him Lexi jumped away as though he might bite and mentally berated herself for being so stupid. The council had warned her against distraction, but her need to be kind to someone who had shown so much compassion for her overrode the mission. It pained her to delay, but Lexi couldn't leave his side.

Days passed in this fashion. Lexi cared for Colton as he healed, and steadily by the hour he improved. Alex, came and went, keeping the shop closed for the sake of space. She was shocked at how easily life on the surface seemed to come. The food was rich and flavorful, and the clothes swaddled her in the warmth of animals. Colton had instructed his brother to take Lexi's coat and unnecessary goods for more suitable materials, and soon she found herself looking like a Topper.

At night she slept on a pallet on the floor of the room while Colton stayed in the chair, and by day she helped him move about and complete simple tasks. They spoke of simple things, and although she felt comfortable with him Lexi still felt as though she knew nothing of the man who had saved her life.

On the fourth day Colton was sleeping in his chair, and Alex had left. Lexi dozed lazily on her pallet when a knock came at the door and she flinched awake. The boys had instructed her to turn away any customers, and inform them to return later.

She opened the door to find a dark man tanned skin and dark eyes looming outside. He was lean and put Colton to shame in all aspects physically. "I'm sorry we are closed," she said.

"I'm here to see Colton. Tell him Jake is here," he said.

"He's resting," she said.

"Well wake him up," Jake growled. Lexi felt her heartbeat quicken. The man frightened her.

"I'm sorry but I really can't do that," she said.

"It's alright Lexi. Let him in," Colton said. Lexi turned to see him standing in the doorway to the waiting room. She looked back to Jake and stepped aside to allow him in, locking the door behind him. "Wait in the back," Colton said sharply. Lexi twitched at his tone. For days he had spoken so kindly to her, and now he sounded the same as he had when he'd first met her in the forest. Sensing trouble with the guest, she obeyed and disappeared into the back room.

"What the fuck man?" Jake sneered after Lexi disappeared. Colton closed the door to the back and limped forward.

"What?" he snapped.

"You were supposed to deliver two weeks ago, and here I find out you've been laying around in town because you got in a fight? Do you want me to fucking end you?" Jake growled. Colton stared down the taller man. Jake had a couple inches on him, in height and breadth.

"I want you to shut the fuck up and listen," Colton sighed, too tired to fight hard. Jake smacked Colton with lightening speed, and the smaller man hissed at the sting.

"No! You listen you impudent little fuck," Jake hissed, never raising his voice above a threatening growl. "Unless you want your brother in the ground I suggest you make good on the deal," Jake said regaining some composure. Colton rubbed his cheek.

"I tried to crack it, and I am sure I eventually can, but I think I have a better fucking way if you'd like to listen to me for more than half a second," he said.

"Oh?" Jake folded his arms.

"I got a fucking Ark Angel. That girl. She came up from the ark I was trying to crack for you and she's going to another one for supplies. She's a free fucking ticket inside, and once I'm inside I can get you your fucking codes. Okay?" Colton sneered. Jake listened, a smile creeping across his face before he held open his arms.

"Colton, Colton, Colton, my boy," he said happily. Jake pulled the younger man into a tight hug and Colton could smell blood on Jake's clothes. "Such a smart on you are. Always thinking," he added.

"Yeah, well I'm not as dumb as Alex," Colton shrugged. Jake let go with a frown.

"Oh? You think being a member was a dumb choice?" he asked cocking an eyebrow. Colton shrugged, not wanting another slap, but unwilling to let the older man escape without insult.

"I don't know Jakie... you're gang just seems to breed shit deals," he shrugged. Jake's smile faded and he scowled.

"Get the girl to let you inside, and then me and the boys will do the rest," he ordered. Colton nodded, dismissive of the order he didn't need. He knew what to do without instruction and felt insulted that the older man felt the need to micromanage everything.

"Of course," Colton sighed.

"I'll still be bringing some blasting power just in case, but you better pray I don't need to use it. You've been promising this shit a long time now kid," Jake said stepping towards the door.

"Oh don't I know it," Colton mocked gripping the door as Jake stepped out.

"Give your best to Alex for me?" Jake asked. Colton scowled and shut the door, huffing a tired sigh of relief to be alone again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Colton was nearly a hundred percent a week after the fight and Lexi dreaded his recovery on some level. She knew it was time to be moving on. Her mission lingered in the back of her mind and at night it haunted her.

When morning came she gathered her belongings and poked her head into Alex's bedroom, where the brothers sat playing cards. "I have to go," she said. They both looked up.

"What?" Colton asked.

"It's time. I need to keep moving. My ark is counting on me," she said evenly. He stood from the edge of the bed.

"So soon?" he asked.

"You're healthy now," she shrugged. Colton bit his lip slightly as he thought, then decided against subtlety.

"You'll die before you ever make it," he said.

"I have to try," Lexi sighed turning her back and heading for the door. Alex rolled his eyes as his younger brother gave chase to the girl.

"Sure, but that still ends in you being dead. What's your problem?" Colton asked as she moved for the front of the shop.

"I don't have any other choice," she said turning on him. They stood face to face in silence for a moment. Each searching the other for a hint of what was happening in their mind.

"I'll go with you," he said at length. Lexi was dumbfounded.

"I've got nothing else to trade... I can't pay you," she said when her mind could formulate a response.

"Only payment I want is to see the inside of an ark," Colton said immediately. His heart fluttered as he waited to see if she would take the bait. Lexi's face wrinkled in amused confusion.

"Inside an ark?" she smirked.

"Yeah," he confirmed.

"Why?" she asked.

"I just really want to see how the other half lives. I don't know how they could produce someone so helpless," he said with a good natured jab. Lexi rolled her eyes, considering the offer. "Come on," he goaded.

"Alright," she shrugged. "I do have a better chance if you come with me," she admitted. Colton let on a haughty laugh.

"You mean you actually have a chance," he corrected. "You'd never make it without someone guiding you. A snow cat would have you for meat in no time," he said turning to go gather his things.

"Snow cat?" Lexi asked feeling her stomach drop. The trip was going to be even more of an adventure than she had anticipated during training. Deep down she was glad to have Colton along.